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The Fire.

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Pub. Oct. 17-1808, by I. Harris, Corner 3^d Pauls Church Yd.

THE FIRE:

OR,

NEVER DESPAIR.



LONDON:

PRINTED FOR J. HARRIS, SUCCESSOR TO E. NEWBERRY, AT
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OF ST. PAUL'S CHURCH-YARD.

1808.

H. Bryer, Printer, Bridge-Street, Blackfriars.

THE FIRE:

OR,

NEVER DESPAIR.

“AND what is to become of us now?” said the widow Markham as she contemplated with eyes running over the remains of her little cottage, which a fire had totally destroyed the preceding evening. “Oh, my children!” she exclaimed, alternately regarding them and the yet burning ruins, “where, now, shall

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I find a place to shelter ye from the inclemency of the weather, or a bed on which ye may repose? Surely, surely, no misery is like mine; no one but me was ever so afflicted."

"Many are more so," said a voice, which she knew to be that of the parish Rector's, "do not despair—Our troubles, as well as blessings, are the immediate dispensations of Heaven, and ordained for some wise reasons our weak understandings cannot fathom. I grant you, Mrs. Markham, your loss is heavy and afflictive; but how much more so would

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it have been, had either of your young ones perished in the flames; do not doubt but Providence will yet stand your friend; the widow and orphan are his peculiar care; and do not fear but his mercy will extend to you."

"I pray that it may," replied the widow, mournfully, "for I have no dependence but on the Almighty."

—"And that dependence will not fail, my good woman; therefore rest confident in hope, that this is but a temporary affliction, designed to try your fortitude and patience;

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mean time, take this trifle, and with your children proceed to farmer Barker's. I have spoken to him, and you and they will find a home there till your little cottage is rebuilt."

"God Almighty is good, and will bless you, Sir, for your goodness to us," said the poor woman, weeping and clasping her hands; "my children will yet have a roof to cover them."

"And we will work for farmer Barker, mammy," said a little white-headed boy about seven years old,

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who had been attentively listening to all that had passed between his Mother and the Rector.

“What can you do, Billy?” said his mother.

“Oh,” he replied, “I can herd the sheep and cows, frighten away the crows from the corn, and next year I can weed it; we must all learn to work now, mammy; and Tommy and Sally must work too.”

“I’ll ask Squire Jones’s gardener to let me help to weed the grounds,” said Tommy, “and then I shall get three-pence a day; little Will Sadler

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had that, and he was turned away yesterday for stealing the fruit ; perhaps if I go to-night to the gardener's, he will employ me to-morrow, and then, mammy, all I get I will bring home to you."

"And can't I work, mammy?" said little Sally.

"I fear you are yet too young, my dear," replied the poor mother, smiling through her tears, "you are but five years old, and have neither strength nor knowledge for any employment yet."

"But I am seven," said Billy.

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“ And I am eight,” said Tommy,
“ and we can both work, and we will
save all our money to build up our
cottage again, for mammy and you
to live in.”

The discourse of the little ones was interrupted by farmer Barker himself, who came to make an offer of his house to the widow; an offer she thankfully accepted.

Billy, whose little imagination was proudly raised at the thought of being able to do something, told the farmer all he could do, and requested leave to serve him.

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“Ah, that you shall, my man,” replied the farmer, “and shall have two-pence a day in the bargain.”— This was delightful news to the little boy, who anxiously waited the arrival of the following day, to begin his operations. Tommy sighed that he should be behind-hand with his brother, but resolved to try if he too could not be successful in his applications.

Stealing behind his mother, as weeping she leaned on the arm of Farmer Birker, to proceed with him home, he watched for the lane which

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led to the Squire's, and ran eagerly down it, arrived at the lodge breathless with the haste he had made; he there stopt to consider what he should say; it was a task that required some deliberation; and the more Tommy thought of it, the more incapable he was of speaking; at length, to his great joy, he saw the Squire himself, at a little distance. Tom advanced to meet him, smiled, made a very low bow, and scratched his head; his little face lifted to meet the Squire's eye, who, just then advancing, patted

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him on the head, and enquired whose little one he was.

“I be the Widow Markham’s boy Tommy, your honour.”

“Who is the Widow Markham, my little fellow?”

“She was burnt out of her house last night, your honour?”

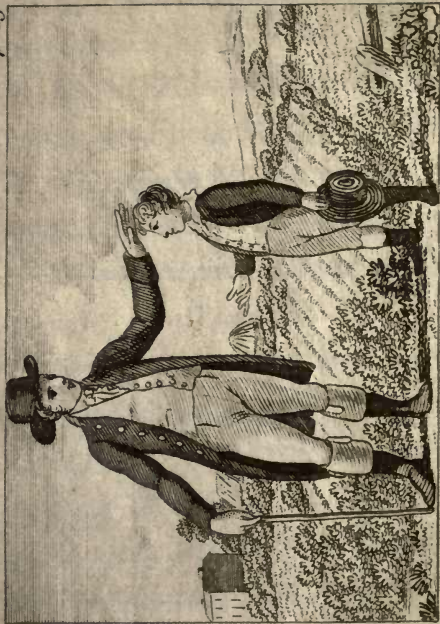
“And what has become of her?” enquired the Squire, eagerly.

“The good Rector got Farmer Barker to take us all into his house, your honour, till he sees what can be done for mammy and us.”



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“How many of you are there, my man?”

“Three, your honour, Billy and Sally, and I, who am eldest.”

“Poor children! what can be done for you? Let me see.”

Tommy, grown bold by the kind and gentle manner in which the Squire spoke, again scratched his little curly pate, and made his best bow, but hesitated when he attempted to speak.

“What would you say, my little fellow?” said Mr. Jones, watching the boy’s countenance, which he saw

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was full of importance—"Here," said he, putting his hand in his pocket, and giving him half a crown, "take this to your Mother, and tell her I will see her to-morrow."

"This was not what I meant," said Tommy, looking at the money; "I did not come to beg, your honour,—I come—I come to ask for work."

"For work!" replied the Squire, in astonishment—"of what work can such a child as you be capable? What is there you can do?"

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“ I can weed in the ground, Sir, and assist Mr. Allen the gardener.”

“ You are very young, very young indeed,” returned the squire, smiling, “ for an assistant to a gardener ; but if you really wish for work, and will promise me to be industrious, I will try you ; but do you know for what I parted with Will Sadler ? ”

“ Yes, your honour, for taking the fruit ; but Mother tells me, t is as great a sin to steal fruit as any thing else ; and indeed, if your honour will but have the goodness to give

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me work, I will do all I can to please you."

"Very well, then I will tell Allen I have engaged you; you must be here by six o'clock every morning; and I will give you for your work, four-pence a day.

"I will work hard indeed, Sir," said the little boy; and away he went jumping and skipping, till he arrived at Redwood Farm.

"Where have you been, Tommy," said his mother? "why did you slip away from me; I was afraid some hurt had come to you."

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“No, no, Mother, I am very well,” he replied, still jumping, “and I shall soon be as rich as Billy; for I am going to work to-morrow, in the Squire’s garden; and what is more, I am to have four-pence a day; and the Squire is coming to see you to-morrow himself; and then you can tell him, if he will build up our old house, he shall have all my money, and then we shall all be happy again; and oh! I forgot, he gave me this money for you,” shewing the half crown.

“Bless! bless! my dear boys!

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great God!" said the poor woman, bursting into an agony of tears, through which, however, she could not help smiling at Tommy's plan to rebuild her little hut, the comforts of which perhaps she never so fully appreciated as at the moment it was totally lost to her. "The worthy Rector was right," said she, "I might have lost more than my house and goods; I might have lost my children; and if at this tender age they manifest such proofs of goodness, what have I not to hope as they rise to manhood; God Almighty, I thank

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thee, that the bitter draught of life is yet sweetened by the fair prospect I have in my young ones. I have yet much to be thankful for."

Early the next morning the two little boys arose to follow their respective employments. Billy never lost sight of his friend the Farmer; nor did little Tommy idle away one minute he could employ. At night they returned home to their Mother, each presenting the little earnings of the day, which were bedewed with her tears, and carefully put by for them.

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“Has the Squire been here, Mammy?” said Tommy.

“No, my dear.”

The child looked blank—“What, can he tell a story; he should not have told me he would come, if he did not mean it.”

“Perhaps, Tommy, he had other concerns of more consequence; but though he did not come, he sent.”

“Ah! he is a good gentleman,” replied the child, delighted. “I was sure he would keep his word.”

Just then Farmer Barker came in, followed by the Squire’s footman,

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with a large bundle in his arms—"I have brought you this, Mrs. Markham, from my Lady; she is very sorry to hear of your misfortune; and as soon as the company is gone, who are now at the lodge, she will send for you, to wait upon her."

"Most willingly," replied the poor woman, "if it be only to return her thanks for her goodness."

"Don't forget the Squire's too, mammy," said Tommy; "for I am sure 'twas he that told my Lady all about us; and you know 'twas he that gave me work."

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“What, are you the little fellow that weeded the shrubbery so clean this morning?”

“Yes, I be he indeed,” replied Tommy, proudly.

“Then you are an industrious little lad,” said the man; “and here is a penny for you; and here is another for you, my little merry face,” giving one to Billy also; for the Farmer here has told me how hard you have worked all day.”

“Ah! that he has,” said the Farmer, “and if he goes on so, I will give him three-pence a day next week,

and make a good farmer of him in time."

"Do not despair, widow," cried the Butler, "there is an old saying, that 'when one door shuts, another opens,' and so I hope, notwithstanding the terrible misfortune which has happened, you will do better than ever."

"Ah, so I say," replied the Farmer, "I tell her to have a good heart; her very misfortune will induce many to help her, that otherwise might not have thought of it; mean time, as the boys grow up, and if they

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continue good, industrious lads, you will be sure they will do all they can to help you ; and God Almighty will bless both."

" Mammy, don't be afraid for us ; we will work every day," said Tommy, " and take care of you and Sally."

" I have no fears, my dear children, but God Almighty will give you good hearts, as he has abilities ; and if it please him that I can struggle so as to give you a little schooling, I shall be thankful."

" All in good time, Widow," re-

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plied the Farmer ; “ don’t fear ; all will be as you wish.”

A month elapsed : the two boys were unremitting in their employments ; their Mother was so far assisted by the neighbourhood, that, independent of some trifling presents, she had as much needle-work to do, as was sufficient to maintain them all tolerably well. At the end of this period she was sent for to the Squire’s.

“ Perhaps, Mrs. Markham,” said the Lady, addressing her, “ you thought I had forgotten you ; but, to

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say truth, Mr. Jones desired I would not send for you, till he could, by observing, form something like an opinion of your little boy."

"I hope, Madam," said the poor woman, trembling, "he has not done any thing amiss."

"Far from it: he tells me Allen praises him as a most diligent lad, and always obliging."

"I am very glad to hear you say so indeed, Madam: the Squire was very good to employ such a little one."

"We consider him as an acqui-

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tion ; and Mr. Jones proposes giving him a little instruction, for two or three years, and at the end of that time, binding him apprentice to the Gardener, if he continues to like the employment : we will board him in the house. Have you any objections ?”

“ Objections ! Ah ! Madam, is it with me to raise them ! you are too good ! I pray God my boy may live to return, by gratitude and fidelity, your goodness to him.”

“ That we must take upon trust,” said the Lady, smiling ; “ good advice

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and good example shall be his ;
and at present he promises well ; but
now, as to the further part of my
commission, we have enquired your
character, with which we are so much
pleased, that Mr. Jones is willing
either to build up your little cottage
again, and give you a trifle towards
furnishing it, or to receive you into
our family, as housekeeper, as ours
is going to leave us in a few weeks ;
but you are to decide for yourself ;
your little girl you may bring with
you, and Tommy is our charge al-
ready ; but that I may not bias you,

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I leave you to consult your friends ; let your determination be which way it will, we shall be ready to assist you ; and any day, within a week, will be time enough for your answer."

Overpowered by the excessive kindness of Mrs. Jones's manner, the poor Widow would have thrown herself at her feet, which the former prevented by leaving the room, desiring, as she went out, that Mrs. Markham would go to the house-keeper, and take some refreshment. In a short time after, the Butler appeared

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to conduct her, saying as he went,
“ Well, Widow, was not I right ? Did
not I say, your misfortune might be
a gain to you ? ”

Upon the Farmer's return from
business in the evening, Mrs. Mark-
ham related the Squire's offer, and
consulted him what was best to
do.

“ Why,” replied the Farmer, “ as
they will keep Tommy, and as you
may have little Sally with you, I think
you had best go there ; Billy shall be
my boy ; nor shall he want learning
either, for he shall go to school ; and



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as I have no children of my own, I will bring him up to the farm. Ah, Billy, will you stay with me?"

"Yes, indeed I will," replied the child, "if I may see Mammy and Tommy, and sister Sally, sometimes; and I shall like to be a farmer."

"And I a gardener," said Tommy; "and you know, Billy, we shall see one another every day at school."

"That is right, my boys," said the Farmer; "and when you learn your books, and can read and write, you will be men; and you must always look to lay up something for your

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Mother; but, Widow, would it not be right you should consult the Rector: he is your friend, and will advise you for the best."

"I will go to him to-morrow morning," replied the widow. She did so. The Rector, highly pleased at her good fortune, advised her by all means to accept the offer of the housekeeper's place, as being not only most certain gain, but less care.

Some time after the Widow had entered into her new situation, the Rector dined at the Squire's, and pur-

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posely descended to the housekeeper's room, to visit her. As the first friend she had met with after her misfortune, she gratefully thanked him for his goodness.

“ Did I not tell you, my good woman,” said the worthy man, “ never to despair, for that the Fatherless and Widow were the immediate care of Providence. Have you not found it so?”

“ I have more reason to be thankful than any human being,” replied the widow ; “ and my heart is frequently ready to burst with gratitude

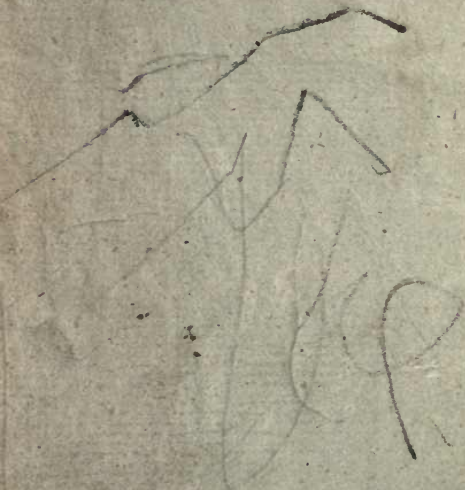
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to that great Being who has so abundantly manifested his care of me and mine."

Many years after, when she saw Tommy head gardener to the Squire, and the purchaser of land on his own account ; Billy, the successor to the worthy Farmer, who died about three months before his favourite was one and twenty ; and her daughter happily married, she frequently exclaimed, "Never, never, let the afflicted despair ; the Almighty is all-sufficient for every thing, and never forsakes those who trust in him.—And never

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will. Those who try to do what is honest, just, and proper, may rely confidently upon his mercy."



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